



Aalborg Universitet

AALBORG UNIVERSITY
DENMARK

Practice research in Social Work

"hands on" knowledge production

Uggerhøj, Lars

Published in:
19th World Conference of Social Work

Publication date:
2008

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Uggerhøj, L. (2008). Practice research in Social Work: "hands on" knowledge production. In *19th World Conference of Social Work* International Federation of Social Workers, IFSW.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal -

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at vbn@aub.aau.dk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Practice research in Social Work
- “hands on” knowledge production

Lars Uggerhøj

Department of Sociology, Social Work and Organisation, Aalborg University, Denmark

Through practice research social work practice and social work research together is in a unique position to develop a research that can qualify both knowledge of and intervention in social life.

Although being practiced for years we know little of what defines practice research or what the possibilities and the barriers are. Differences that raises many questions: Is practice research a special research method? Is practice research only focusing on practice and questions raised by practice? Is practice research carried out by educated researchers, by practitioners or by both? Is practice research carried out by or in collaboration with service users? Can practice research aim only at producing analysis and findings or does it have to produce changes in social work – and to whom? Practice research is and can be looked upon from different angles, from different positions and with different interests. To understand, qualify and develop practice research it is necessary to conceptualize and define – to build up a common understanding of practice research or at least to obtain a better understanding of what the differences are and what they contain.

As an introductory note, it has to be emphasized that there is an essential difference between the researcher and a person who works in a profession: the researcher views research as a goal in itself while the practitioner views research as means. To the researcher, the research and the research process is the main target. To the practitioner, the goal is to present initiatives and viable solutions towards social problems. Qualified practice is built on many connected elements. One of the most central – although not the only one – is the social worker's knowledge foundation and the knowledge about the effects of initiatives and planning in social work. The fulcrum of the research is the elements that create a natural relation between research and practice as a knowledge-based practice and regularly evaluations of ongoing initiatives. Hence, an identity of interests exists, but it is essential that the difference between ends and means at the same time constitutes a difference which is important to be aware of in the collaboration between practice and research as well as in the development of practice research. This does not mean that the goal is that all interests between research and practice have to be different, but both the researcher and the social worker have to be conscious of the difference in interests which exists between the both of them.

What is Practice Research?

In the discussions concerning practice research it is often unclear what practice research consists of. It seems that two approaches can be characterized. This presentation will not operate with these approaches as incompatible as both will be included in what I will define as practice research. To understand and discuss this it is, however, necessary as a start to look at the two approaches as divided. The first approach defines practice research as types of research where research is carried out in a close collaboration between practice and research where it is not crucial who carries out the data-collection and/or the analysis – although it is under the management of educated researchers and research institutions. The second approach will define practice research as types of research, evaluations and investigations carried out by practitioners. The Danish research leader Knud Ramian together with a line of English researchers (Ramian 2005) represents this approach. A third approach – which can be connected to approach two – focuses specifically on user-participation in research processes. This position does not only include practice research, but all kinds of research activities. Approach one and two will be examined and discussed below.

In approach one, the starting point is that a need and demand for a close collaboration between practice and research, which commits both parts, exists. However, the starting point is also that both parts primarily do “what they are best at” at the same time. It seems that a wish – or even an ideal – to establish a non-problematic collaboration between research, education and practice in social work has developed – an ideal that could be considered as an immediate strength, but what in the long run has the risk of constituting a danger towards both research and practice. It is not possible to establish an unproblematic collaboration – at the most to make it less problematic. The wish for and the ideal of the unproblematic collaboration will imply the risk that both research, education and practice will become toothless – they will, to put it bluntly, risk to find the least common denominator. We are probably talking about a never ending conflict – and thus talking about various elements of disagreements and contradictions, which in many ways have a universal character in the discussion. To put it another way, there will exist different interests in the two areas. If research and practice is supposed to be qualified, it is crucial that these different elements are not diluted. The struggle between the partners, the conflict between the two fields is, from their position looked upon as, the best potential for both areas. Research must always be entitled to look behind the truth, the self-understanding and the ideals in practice and must be able to always focus on grey and maybe invisible areas in practice. If research has to take problems within the collaboration emerged from unpopular research findings too much into consideration, the justification of the research fields existence will be threatened.

It is difficult to pin down how the collaboration between practice and research in practice research is supposed to be organized. But practice research cannot be research findings solely planned, carried through and “delivered” from the researcher to practice. The main point is that practice and research develop every single collaboration in common. It also means that the collaboration can look different and can change on the way. The research could be planned together and discussed on the way by researchers and practitioners but carried out by researchers. The research could be set with goals and research questions, it could be discussed on the way through the process as well as it could be a part of a learning process where both researchers and practitioners participate all the way through. Research could also be a part of an ongoing research process where it is hard to divide learning processes and research/examination processes.

The second approach is based on a definition which does not distinguish much or maybe not at all from practice research in the first approach. According to Epstein: *Practice based research is the use of research inspired principles, designs and research methods in everyday practice enabling participants to answer questions, which originates from practice and which will give answers in ways that will inform practice* (Epstein 2001: 17). However, connected to this, it is said that *practice research is the phenomenon that occurs when practitioners commit themselves to something they call research in their own practice while they, at the same time, practice social work* (Ramian 2003: 5), which will distance this approach from approach one as practitioners are expected to be active researchers in the research process. The difference is even more clear when Ramian, defines six features in the perception of the phenomenon practice research:

1. Practitioners use at least 80% of their working hours as practitioners;
2. Research questions focus on problems connected to everyday practice;
3. Common recognized scientifically based methods are used;
4. Projects are made feasible;
5. Findings are to be communicated to other practitioners;
6. The research field is a practice field.

(Ramian 2003: 5)

With Ramian's six features, practice is the research institution (instead of the university) and *the researcher [practitioner] adjusts his or her strategy and methods in ways that make it possible to carry through the research activities in practice* (Ramian 2003: 6) as well as findings are not presented in typical academic journals but through conferences, seminars etc. Ramian points out that the gap between research and practice – when practitioners carry out research themselves – increases the possibility to produce knowledge relevant for practice and to apply findings to practice. Practitioners need not to be educated researchers but they need to be skilled in research

to be able to perform research as well as collaborative practitioner research network has to be established. Which again will divide the two approaches, as the first approach will point out that the responsibility for research projects will be carried out by educated researchers.

To prevent the two different positions from producing an unnecessary conflict about the same notion and maintain the differences, it can be helpful to define the different positions in the following way: 1) research that focuses on collaboration between practice and research (approach one) will be defined as *practice research*; 2) research that focuses on processes controlled and accomplished by practitioners (approach two) will be defined as *practitioner research*; 3) research that focuses on user participation in the research process (approach three) will be defined as *user controlled research* (this approach will not be discussed in this paper).

On the basis of the above-mentioned, I will focus on *practice research* defined as:

- a type of research that describes, analyses and develops practice, a research based on generally approved academic standards as well as on experience from, knowledge and needs within social work practice;
- a close and binding collaboration between research/research settings and practitioner /practice in planning, completion and dissemination of the research;
- an analysis and descriptions of current specific issues in a theoretical generalized context by examining/describing the often complex connection between practice and contexts of social work.

This approach does not exclude practitioner participation in the research process – on the contrary, practitioners will often be included on different levels in the research process and as researchers themselves. But educated researchers still carry the responsibility for the research quality. My point is that this approach and definition of practice research is open and including instead of closed and excluding. And it is focused on knowledge production and learning processes in social work practice and research as a whole instead of mainly focusing on processes within chosen practices.

Different Interests in Practice Research

Although I have argued that both practice and research have interests towards collaboration in research processes, it is not tantamount to a total convergence between all areas within the field. On the contrary, it is useful to be aware that there are contradistinctions which cannot be neutralized as this will risk establishing a collaboration that focuses on the lowest common denominator. Some of the natural contradistinctions – and consequences hereof – will be

discussed below. The basis of the discussion is that there are the following stakeholders in practice research:

- Users;
- Social workers;
- The organizational frame;
- Politicians;
- Reserachers.

Users have a natural interest in receiving the most qualified support as possible. Although many users hope that their participation as informants in studies in social work can have a more general impact on qualifying for example public support (Uggerhøj 1995), the focus of attention will be focused towards the most qualified support to their own individual and specific problems. A study on user experience and pedagogical treatment in a Danish FamilyHome dealing with families at risk suggests that users judge the intervention differently according to severity of their problems (Uggerhøj 2000). Furthermore, the study shows how users and social workers judge the same activity differently. While social workers judge selected interventions positively according to their specific task to observe families in the Familyhome, users judge the same activity negatively according to their need to obtain help and support from professional social workers (Uggerhøj 2000). If social workers give support to families they will risk not to carry through the task of observing family interaction. The example shows that both social workers and users have to live with contradiction and dilemmas.

Social workers are as a part of their work bound to a political, an organizational and a professional context. It is not possible for social workers solely to follow their own values or needs expressed by users. The legislation frames both possibilities and obligations, for example what problem requires which intervention/economical support and what kind of demand can be put on users to obtain support. Futhermore, the resources and the display of force are often framed by legislation too. Moreover, the often administrative and/or political detailed management in social work will influence the frames and the settings. At the same time, local authorities, politicians and civil servants interpret legislation, by which social work often will be organized and structured differently in different organizations and different municipalities. Finally, social workers' educational background and professional values and ideals will influence the way social work is implemented in practice. Professional values and ideals will often appear as a contradistinction to the organizational frames and to some extend also to user needs.

Generally seen, the *organizational frame* is influenced by political defined boundaries, locally based cultures and political traditions. Moreover, the wish within social work organizations to

“establish order in chaos” concerning user problems and the wish to appear responsible and rational could contrast to users’ and social workers’ wish to focus on individual issues and the users own understanding of the issue – wishes that is based on the users own understanding instead of based on a public rational understanding. The organizational needs – together with a political request for more documented and effective social work – also leads to focus on evidence based knowledge production and research instead of other kinds of research approaches.

Politicians need to focus on tools to measure the effect of political decisions as they are to defend the implementations towards the citizens. The individual need from a user and also descriptions of collaboration processes in social work have less importance æ this is often considered as a need concerning the individual user or the single social worker as a part of the social worker’s professional qualifications.

Researchers are in their approach influenced by their own research area, their own needs and also university management requirements to qualify themselves within the academic field. Research areas and qualification needs will not always converge with the needs and the wishes in social work practice. The demands of publishing in peer reviewed periodicals with detailed and traditional criteria for both research and the content and the structure of the article can be in opposition to the needs for information in practice. Furthermore, researchers can be influenced by the specific focus from claimants – often seen in the economical frame of the tender. Finally, the scientific need of having a distance to the studied field can appear opposite to the need in practice to closeness. Or to put it another way: the scientific ideal of not being influenced and not willingly to influence practice and the need in practice to influence research and to let research be included in development processes of practice can be difficult to come together.

The different stakeholders cannot and must not necessarily come together, but it is central that practice research constitutes a series of contradistinctions and meetings which will include dilemmas that both researchers and practice will have to respond to and act towards. Dilemmas are not to be solved, but they will have to be included as substantial components in the practice research process.

Challenges for Research and Practice

Actors on the social work arenas, for example practitioners, claimants, researchers and users, have – as mentioned above – different interests, that are important for each and every one of the them – and significant to society as well. Interests so important and significant that the quality of function depends on the possibility of retaining these different interests. Instead of trying to balance or sooth out these differences, it is important to enlighten them. Moreover, in this way, it is possible

to gain more understanding of each other – and each others interests. Research finds itself in the most powerful position and will thus have a special obligation to emphasise the necessity of the awareness of different interests. Exactly as the powerful position of social workers towards users applies social workers with a special obligation to enlighten the power that lies within their relationship.

My claim is that researchers have a special position with a special responsibility to respond to these contradistinctions. It is thus evident to specify that the possibility of having a dialectical approach is based on the existence of the differences and contradistinctions that are crucial to the *raison d'être* of the two fields and crucial for the possibility of the two areas being able to challenge each other. From this position, my claim is also that the researcher never could or should become a practitioner as well as the practitioner never could or should become a researcher. However, this does not mean that efforts should not be launched to utilize these differences to develop more qualified social work.

It is, at the same time, important that this position also accentuates that no individual is skilled enough to give sufficient answers (Flyvbjerg, 2001:61), meaning that the role of both researchers and practitioners is to advance parts of the answer as an input in an ongoing dialogue concerning issues and risks mankind is confronted with and concerning how eventually to solve these issues. From this point of view, research and practice posses both part of the answer and part of the solution – by which position everybody (researchers and practitioners) is producing knowledge. Thus, the position attaches importance to challenges from different interests and to different levels. Flyvbjerg defines this kind of research as a context-depended science in which the key elements are: *closeness* (the research is conducted close to reality and is subject to reactions from the surroundings), *minutiae* (research is studying the major in the minor), *practice* (research will focus on practical activities and practical knowledge), and finally *concrete cases* (research will methodologically build on case-studies) (Flyvbjerg 1991). According to Flyvbjerg, theory has a minor and context has a major position. Flyvbjerg does not criticize rules, logic, analytical rationality and efforts to theorize, but he criticizes the dominance of these elements compared to other phenomenons. Finally, Flyvbjerg accentuates that dialogue has a central position in actual science – dialogue with those who are studied, with other researchers, with decision-makers as well as together with other central actors in the field. Practice research is – from this position – a possible way to establish a dialogue enabling the development of actual science.

The challenge from research to practice will be to look at existing truth and common understanding within the profession. To try to establish an awareness and enlighten phenomenons, actions and considerations to which the practitioners tends to be blind, exactly because they are in practice. From this point of view, it is less challenging to just describe and measure effects of everyday

social work practice. My goal is not to claim that it is not interesting to carry out studies of what social work is and what the effect of social work really is. Such studies are necessary and it is probably the most popular approach among researchers. But it does not necessarily challenge practice, research and society as it risks to focus only on the blind angles and the insight knowledge within practice. Thus, a too close connection and understanding between research and practice needs is futile and may hinder new knowledge to emerge. It is interesting, though, that research simultaneously needs to establish closeness and distance to practice. This distance makes it possible to get the necessary overview, to have more abstract considerations and not to get too involved into local insight and understanding.

The challenge from practice is to support or provoke research to become more creative as a part of understanding a practice field build on complexity – and to act flexible instead of constructing a research suitable reality – as well as challenging research to be aware of elements of power in both social work and research processes. From a practice point of view, research improves the comprehension of everyday problems and it also improves the possibility to solve these problems in a more qualified way. This approach will challenge tendencies within the scientific field to view phenomena from a more abstract and theoretical position. Exactly the theoretical and analytic approach is pivotal in the internal “science war” between basic research, frankly speaking, which has a high status and practice research which has a low status. Thus, practice will challenge research right in the heart. Some see it in this way that research can lose its basis and identity. In spite of declarations of equality ideal, social work is marked by human beings’ different reactions to the same problem. Hence, research in social work has to be able to establish studies of this action oriented field and this build in differences between research and practice. Research in social work must in this way be able to challenge and intervene into a mobile, complex and ever changing practice, knowledge and context – the ongoing construction of society that social work is a part of.

Thus, practice research is a field which is characterized by being influenced by and by having influence on practice at the same time. A research field that will be linked especially to practice and a field that even in its focus in depth and independence will be marked by the width of life – and from that position will risk a lower status within the academic society. Research has to focus also on actions – not only findings – and on quantitative aspects – because this is what has a severe impact on practice. In this way practice research in social work, so to say, has to walk hand in hand with practice without becoming lovers. The point of this position is that practice research seems to constitute a common level for both practice and research. A level in where it is possible to expand challenges for both fields. Research has to emphasize that knowledge is produced by both research and practice, meaning that research has to establish a close partnership together with

management, social workers and users in the development of research projects, in the data collection process, for example using practitioners and users in this process – the development of forms of action research, the development of methods of interviewing which does not just reproduce the therapeutic dialogue between user and social worker. The strength for both practice and research within this position is to stay with the challenges. The danger for both fields is to avoid and reject the challenges.

Conclusion

In the beginning of this paper, I raised some questions that I on the basis of the above discussions and definitions will try to answer:

Is practice research a special research method? No, it is not a special research method. On the contrary, it is possible and often necessary to use different types of research methods as this will often strengthen the research. The critical issue is the fact that the selected research methods have to answer the research questions posed by research and practice in every single study. Certain creative forms of research processes, for example action research, will be beneficial to utilize in development processes and processes in where the participants interacts in the whole process. However, in order to establish it as a practice research project, this is not required. As mentioned earlier on in this paper, practice research is, from my point of view including instead of excluding.

Does practice research only focus on practice and questions raised by practice? In practice research questions are considered important to both practice and research. In a Danish practice research project not only questions related to actual practice are referred to. It is also possible and needed to focus on research angles that have considerable more abstract and theoretical relations. Hence, it is pivotal, that it is possible, as a part of practice research projects, to raise practice based evaluations and investigations to a more theoretical level, which will enable researchers to answer some questions in depth and to make it possible to develop new theories and/or new methods in social work.

Is practice research carried out by educated researchers, by practitioners or by both? As it appears from above, the educated researcher has the responsibility for practice research, unlike practitioner research where the responsibility and the execution is within practice. Practice research involves practitioners and users as researchers and as collaboration partners throughout the whole research process and does not prevent that practitioner research becomes a part of the process.

Is practice research carried out by or in collaboration with service users? It is possible – although not always needed – to involve users in practice research. If users are to participate and

as a part of their participation have responsibility for the research process, it should be characterized as user controlled research.

Can practice research aim only at producing analysis and findings or does it have to produce changes in social work – and to whom? As mentioned above, it is possible for practice research to integrate analysis and to produce findings, which are not possible to transform directly to specific changes in practice. In cooperation practice and research can easily decide to implement a theoretical study, for example on the basis on one or more empirical studies finishes earlier on, and on the basis of this obtain different types of knowledge than evaluations and investigations based on a high degree of transferability will be able to impart. As mentioned before, it is pivotal that both practice experience/knowledge and research experience/knowledge are to be involved in practice research processes. One of the qualifications of research is exactly how to implement theoretical and more abstract analysis, which should also be utilized in practice research projects. If practice research, however, has to become a part of knowledge production processes and/or part of qualifying practice, it needs to accept being a part of changing processes in practice – and not a part of traditional research processes. Research cannot place itself on the sidelines leaving the process whenever the data collection and the analyses have been carried through. The research will have to be involved in the part of informing, for example educating practitioners in new social work methods/tools or in ways of carrying out social work in new and different ways and involved in turning the more theoretical and analytical findings into useable tools in everyday social work. As well as representatives from practice need to be involved or at least have to accept that practical issues must be turned into more theoretical issues or positions and have to be involved in processes that develop research methods useable to practice research. It is necessary for both parts to be open minded and both to accept being in kinds of learning circles. It is not only practice that will learn from research. It is also research that will learn, qualify and develop research and research methods from practice.

References

- Epstein, I (2001) *Mining for silver while dreaming of gold: Clinical data-mining in practice-based research* in I. Epstein and S. Blumenfield *Clinical Data-Mining in Practice-Based Research: Reflecting on Social Work Practice in Hospitals.*, Binghampton, N.Y., Hayworth Press
- Flyvbjerg, B. (1991) *Rationalitet og magt*, København: Akademisk Forlag
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2001) *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*, New York: Cambridge University Press
- Hunter, E. & Tsey, K. (2002) Indigenous health and the contribution of sociology: a review, *Health Sociology Review* 11, 1-2, (<http://hsr.e-contentmanagement.com/11.1/11-1p79.htm>)
- Løchen, Y. (1993) *Forpliktende fantasi*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget
- Ramian, Knud (2003) *Praksisforskning som læringsrum*, Uden for Nummer 7/2003
- Uggerhøj, Lars (2000) *Den indviklede udvikling – en rapport om Familieinstitutionen Bethesdas arbejde med forældre-evalueringer*, Center for Forskning i Socialt Arbejde, København
- Uggerhøj, Lars (1995) *Hjælp eller afhængighed*, Aalborg Universitetsforlag, Aalborg